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5. TOWARDS EFFECTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION: AN ANALYSIS OF MANAGEMENT INHIBITORS AND FACILITATORS

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication is key for the successful management of chemical or biological accidents or threats (terrorism). Given the devastating destructive potential of chemical and biological warfare agents to both mankind and the environment, they are always a concern that requires immediate attention, coordination and response from a number of different stakeholders. In a time constraining situation, however, there are several inhibitors that may block or disrupt the flow of communication, and which potentially increase the likelihood of disaster of large scale. This paper, using a crisis communication model, looks at some effects of crises on organizations and how they, in turn, affect the critical issue of communication during a crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on organizational behavior in critical times currently under way at the Centre for Marine and Earth Sciences and Technologies, SC, Brazil, suggest that organizational effectiveness in crisis prevention and management is often compromised due to a combination of factors. Apart from factors already identified and well documented in the literature, such as the culture of the organization and their core believes (1) (2) (3) (4) (5), the approach to both internal and external communication (6) (7), it has been identified that more fundamental and some how elementary issues are driving organizations into creating further aggravation to their operations. One critical issue revealed by the studies is that organizations are often unable to define and state problems. Although most of the organizations studied seem to be efficient in identifying organizational, operational and structural problems, stating and communicating efficiently these problems to both internal and external interest publics have been quite another matter.

The way organizations define a problem has a direct correlation to how it is going to approach it in both formal and informal ways. Moreover, a definition of a problem tells as much about the phenomenon being defined as about the definer itself. Thus, it is an important management issue that has been largely overlooked. The net result of this neglected management issue is that organizations have developed a disturbing pattern: the ability of generating further crises by responding to critical events, even though in many cases the solutions are practically correct. Where these patterns were observed, two situations were predominant: (1) the application of the right solution to the wrong problem, and (2) the application of the wrong solution to the right problem.

Research conducted by Wieck in the 1980s (8) (9) may partially explain this organizational dysfunction. Weick argues that when the variety that exits in the system to be managed exceeds the variety in the people whom must control it we have a problem of "Requisite Variety". That is, when people have less variety than is requisite to cope with the system, they miss important information, their diagnoses are incomplete, and their remedies are shortsighted and can magnify rater than reduce or eliminate a problem.

The potential destructive effect of chemical and biological terrorism attacks provides an enormous challenge to the central core of management. Organizations, therefore, should

provide answers to three essential questions: (a) what role management plays in the incubation of crisis potential?; (b) what role management plays in the prevention and management of crisis events?; (c) why do many organizations and managers still deal with the issue of crisis in a superficial manner? Inherent to all these questions there are the critical issues of problem identification, definition, and organizational communication. This paper argues that the definition of a problem plays a key role in crisis management and resolution. Moreover, it addresses several organizational and situational inhibitors that may block or disrupt the flow of communication, which may potentially increase the likelihood of further disasters. The paper also identifies some facilitating organizational issues that enhance management abilities to function effectively in critical times.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

Crises occur as a consequence of the dysfunctional nature of organization's culture, core beliefs, values and basic assumptions of decision markers and the approach taken to both external and internal communication (10) (11). A crisis evolves through a pattern of different phases, each with its own distinct features and dynamics, that demands specific management approaches (12) (13). Since the status of a crisis (intensity, scope, effects on stakeholders, etc.) changes as it develops within each phase, the various stakeholders involved in managing the crisis need to be constantly informed of crisis status so that they could act (decision making) in a concerted and effective way. Communications, then, play one of the most important roles in the process of administering and resolving crises. The effectiveness of strategy implementation, however, depends on basic organizational procedures, such as problem identification and definition. While several mechanisms, both organizational and technological, have been developed and used successfully by organizations worldwide, it seems that stating and defining a problem is far more difficult for organizations.

Defining an issue is an extremely important, tough complex, task. The way one defines a particular problem necessarily implies in the way the problem will be approached by the organization and all the management issues that would be involved in trying to resolve it. Considering the potential destructive effect of chemical and biological terrorism attacks, defining a particular event (threat or attack) poses an enormous challenge to organizations since it will dictate the way the organization will deal with the problem. That is, manage all the prevention, preparation, and management issues of a possible attack.

How do we define Bio/Chem Terrorism?
- By its causes?
- By its consequences?
- By its degree of unpredictability?
- By the means of attack?
- By the speed of onset?
- By the type of substance used?
- By its intrinsic characteristics?
- By its degree of severity?
- By its political implications?
- By typology?
- Etc.

Individually or in combination, there are several significant management implications.

DECISION-MAKING DURING CRISES AND ORGANIZATIONAL
COMMUNICATION – INHIBITORS AND FACILITATORS

Decision making is an integral part of crisis management process (14). The quality of decision depends greatly upon the quality of information available to the decision process which in turn depends on how and when (timing) it is communicated to the decision making person or team. That is, if communication is not effective and timely, quality information is of no use or value. Communication is regarded as the "essence" of crisis management. Without a well conceived and implemented communication system chaos reign. There are, however, many factors that may constrain communications in times of crises.

A typical feature of crisis is information overload. The quality of information input into the decision process depends on the ability of the system to effectively absorb information flow, thus preventing overloads. Information overload results in dysfunctional selective attention, retention of information, and delays and subversion of communication flows. Information overload and the need to act quickly cause decision makers to use fewer communication channels for the collection and dissemination of information. Limiting the search for information can be disastrous. Divergent searching increases the variety and quantity of alternative solutions, and is essential in poorly structured circumstances in which fluency and flexibility of thought are vital.

When communication is not effective, the information content of the messages is frequently distorted because intermediate message-handling units omit, delay, filter, and most often process incorrect information. As a result, the decision group not only has fewer creative solutions available to it, but it is also more likely to fashion flawed solutions from the information they have.

CB crises invariably exert a great amount of emotional and psychological pressure on decision makers. During a CB crisis stress is of such magnitude that it promotes dysfunctional behavior. An increasingly severe crisis tends to make creative policy both more important and less likely. Decision makers find it harder to reason abstractly and are also less able to predict the consequences of various alternative courses of action. All this contributes to a restricted and distorted understanding of the decision situation. As a result, unaided crisis decision makers tend to make and implement inferior decisions.
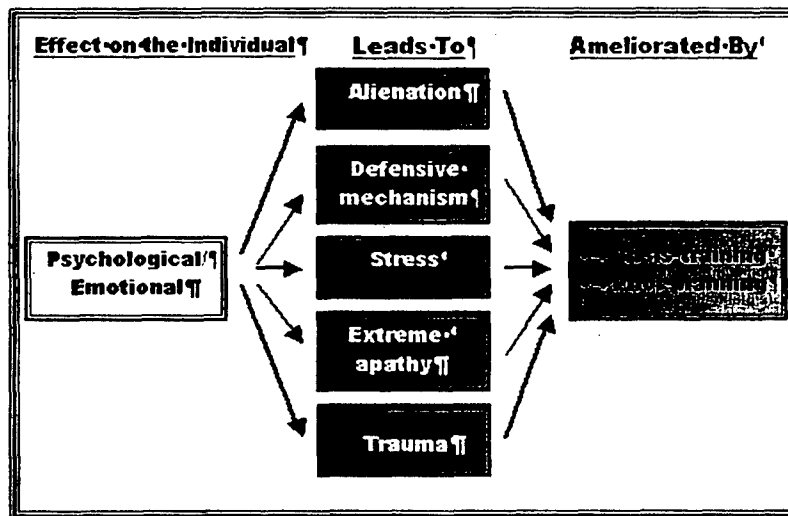

Figure 1

In this scenario, open communications channels and quality information are the only hope for a positive outcome. Effective internal communication enables management to make sound decisions and be in control of the situation whilst effective external communications allows management to tell their history avoiding rumors and pseudo experts accounts. The net results are often a faster resolution of crisis, less internal anxiety and higher commitment to crisis management, less speculation and scrutiny from various external publics, among others.

Communications during crisis differ substantially from communications in "normal times". Those involved or responsible for dealing with CB threats and crisis need to have in place specially designed communication strategies and structure for managing adverse situations. It is virtually impossible to learn about crisis communications or to invent things in the heat of a crisis. As crisis evolves, each phase requires different management treatment and approaches. The amount of attention given to each particular issue is clearly an strategic decision of the organization and each decision taken will inevitably reflect on the status of crisis and on its resolution potential.

Effective crisis management starts well before an issue erupts into a full blown crisis. Indeed, it is much safer to manage the symptoms than the chain of complications resulted from a crisis. Communications, then, plays a vital role in crisis prevention. Most major crises to date (including some well-publicized CB crises) could have been prevented if the organizations involved had in place effective communication systems. Communication system in this sense means both formal and informal communications. As mentioned previously, organizations, depending on the nature of their culture and core beliefs, have a high potential for crisis incubation. Therefore, understanding and de-codifying the unwritten organizational rules and norms seems to be of crucial value for crisis prevention and management. If an organization has a crisis-prone culture, the incubation of crisis will occur as a function of the strategic decision-making that takes place within the organization and the failure of management to identify and acknowledge the limitation of its control mechanisms. A crisis-prone culture inhibits communications that, in turn, severely weakens management's ability to develop resilience within the system. In another words, it deprives an organization from the essential abilities and mechanisms needed for developing preventive measures and strongly influence the psychological, emotional, and technical abilities of its member to manage the crises that occur.
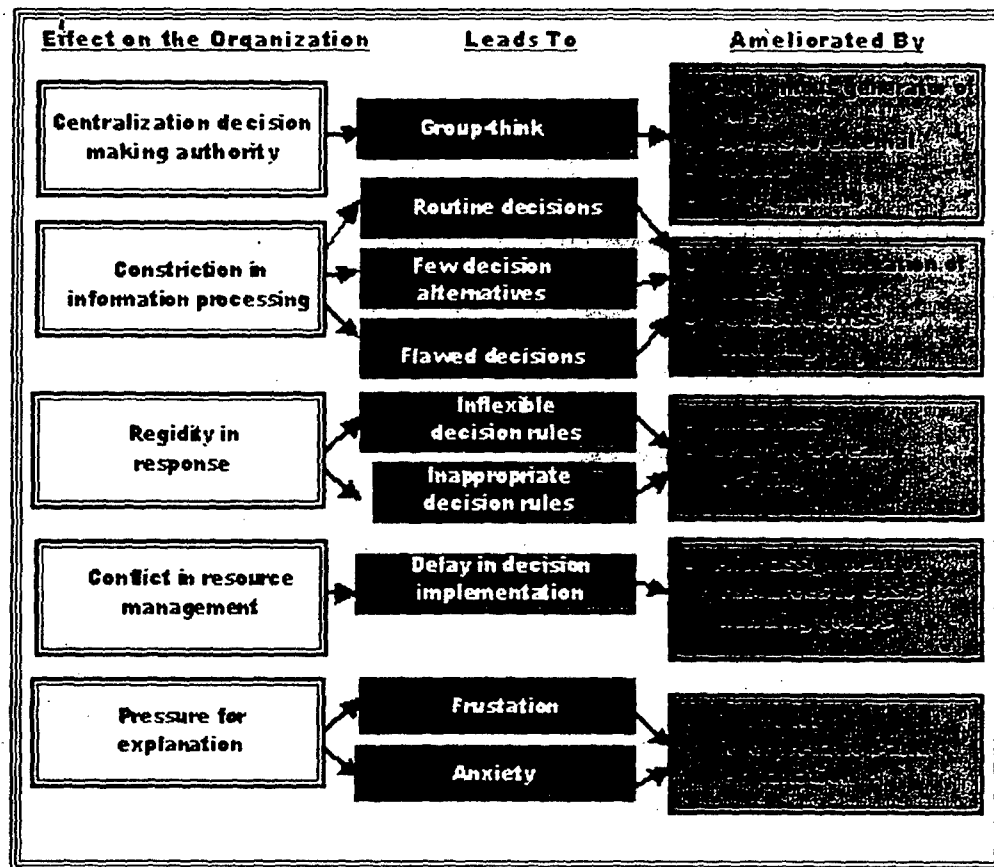
Effect on the Organization	Leads To	Ameliorated By
Centralization decision making authority	Group-think	
Constriction in information processing	Routine decisions	
	Few decision alternatives	
	Flawed decisions	
Regidity in response	Inflexible decision rules	
	Inappropriate decision rules	
Conflict in resource management	Delay in decision implementation	
Pressure for explanation	Frustation	
	Anxiety	

Figure 2

Considering the evolutionary nature of a crisis, a communication model that contemplates all phases of a crisis has been developed. The model proposes that open lines of communications should be established to and from the environment. The effectiveness of crisis management depends not only on the efficiency of the formal and informal communication structures but also on the organization's ability and capacity to absorb, filter, process, manage, and implement strategies based on the information received.

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SIMPLIFIED CRISIS COMMUNICATION MODEL

Phases

Warning/ Signal Detection

Preparation/ Prevention

Crisis

Containment Damage Limitation

Recovery

Learning

Communication Flow

Feeding The Environment

Internal Stakeholders

External Stakeholders

Feeding The System

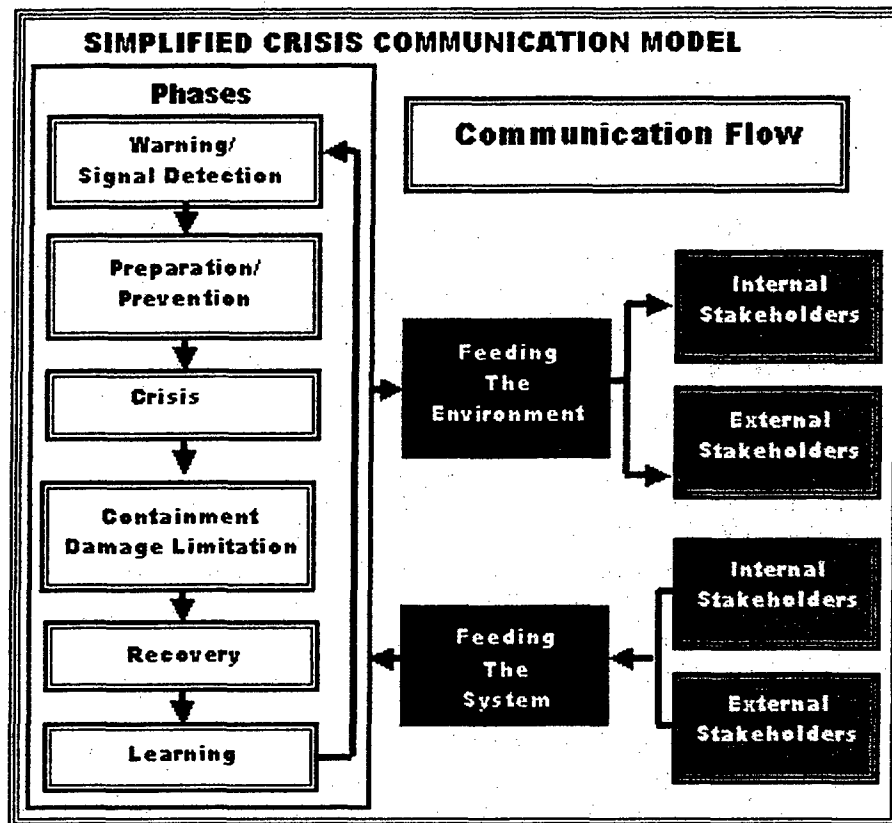Internal Stakeholders

External Stakeholders

Figure 3

Crisis communication training is essential. CB crises invariably arouse a great deal of emotions and scrutiny from all sectors of society is unavoidable. Different stakeholders require a different set of information to satisfy their particular interests or concerns. The establishment of a crisis management communication center is imperative.

CONCLUSION

Effective crisis management starts with problem identification and definition. Organizational studies in Brazil revealed that despite the fact that organizations are becoming increasingly efficient in identifying problems in both their operating environment and systems, they have difficulties in defining, stating and communicating them. This has resulted in the implementation of inappropriate strategic decisions, which in turn generated further crises.

Prevention and management of crises depends on the effectiveness of communications. Communications and management inhibitors emanate from the characteristics of crises themselves (information overload, etc.), from the limited complexity of system operators (requisite variety), from the consequences of crises on both the organization and on the individuals (psychological and emotional toll). In order to enhance management's abilities to deal with crises it is necessary to understand how crises behave in each phase of its life cycle and what role communications plays in each individual phase. This paper examined the role communications (formal and informal) play in times of crisis,

emphasizing its importance for effective decision making for crisis prevention and in averting further chaos. Facilitating factors have also been identified and explored.

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KEYWORDS
Problem definition, crisis management, crisis communication, stakeholder, crisis communication model

FIGURES
Figure 1 – The Consequences of Crisis at a Psychological and Emotional Levels
Figure 2 – The Consequences of Crisis at an Organizational Level
Figure 3 – A Simplified Crisis Communication Model